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RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHIN #2012/01 2430934  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 310934Z AUG 07  
FM AIT TAIPEI  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6626  
INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 7198  
RUEHHK/AMCONSUL HONG KONG 8452

UNCLAS AIT TAIPEI 002012

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DEPARTMENT FOR INR/R/MR, EAP/TC, EAP/PA, EAP/PD - NIDA EMMONS  
DEPARTMENT PASS AIT/WASHINGTON

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [OPRC](#) [KMDR](#) [KPAO](#) [TW](#)

SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: TAIWAN'S UN REFERENDUM

¶1. Summary: As Taiwan's major Chinese-language dailies continued to report on the aftermath of U.S. Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte's TV interview on Taiwan's UN referendum, news coverage on August 31 also focused on the DPP Central Executive Committee's passage of the party's "normal country" resolution draft Thursday; on the 2008 president poll; and on a Mainland Affairs Council decision to allow Chinese-born NBA star Yao Ming to visit Taiwan in September. All major Chinese-language papers carried on inside pages a story by "The Nelson Report" saying if Taiwan insists on holding a UN referendum, Washington is likely to change its ambiguous policy of "not supporting" Taiwan independence.

¶2. In terms of editorials and commentaries, Columnist Antonio Chiang noted in the mass-circulation "Apple Daily" that Taiwan's UN referendum, which caused strong repercussions on the triangular relationship among Washington, Beijing and Taipei, is a game of crisis in virtual reality and also a test of the United States and China's joint management of Taiwan. A separate "Apple Daily" op-ed, however, said no matter whether the UN referendum bodes well or ill for Taiwan, President Chen's ability to turn the issue of de jure Taiwan independence from a taboo for Taiwan into a hot potato or a potential fuse between the United States and China has helped him build the foundation for his future political position in Taiwan. An editorial in the pro-independence, English-language "Taiwan News" criticized Negroponte and said he has no right to scold Taiwan's democracy. An op-ed in the conservative, pro-unification, English-language "China Post," on the other hand, urged Washington to take effective step to make President Chen "halt his irrational and risky course on Taiwan independence." End summary.

A) "A Game of Crisis in Virtual Reality"

Columnist Antonio Chiang noted in his column in the mass-circulation "Apple Daily" [circulation: 530,000] (8/31):

"... The Taiwan issue will surely become a major agenda to be discussed during [Chinese President] Hu Jintao's meeting with [U.S. President] George W. Bush when the APEC summit is held in Australia in early September. The Chinese Communist Party's 17th National Congress, which will kick off in October, is essential for stabilizing Hu's power. Before that, [China's Taiwan Affairs Office Director] Chen Yunlin will set out for the United States to lobby the State Department, the National Security Council, major think tanks and overseas Chinese associations [on Taiwan's UN referendum].

Beijing regards [Taiwan's] UN referendum as a test to its 'Anti-Secession Law;' the referendum is also a test on the joint management of Taiwan by Washington and Beijing. Beijing has obviously worked out an all-out plan, trying every way it can to stop the referendum. ...

"In early September, A-Bian will have a dialogue with U.S. think tanks via the digital videoconference, in which former U.S. National Security Council official Michael Green is ready to challenge Bian.

... This will be a great chance for both sides [i.e. Taipei and Washington] to communicate and find a way out of their current standoff. If the Bian administration can handle this issue as a major crisis like Beijing does, there will still be chances to stop the trains from colliding with each other."

B) "A-Bian Toying with the United States and China Stubbornly"

Professor Emerson Chang, director of Nan Hua University's Department of International Studies, opined in the mass-circulation "Apple Daily" [circulation: 530,000] (8/31):

"... President Chen Shui-bian's calculated layout for the UN referendum and his unbending resistance to U.S. pressure indicate that the United States has lost its authority to define the status quo across the Taiwan Strait, and that it might as well think about how it can employ its power to make Chen make up his mind. ... The United States' feeling of incapability was also reflected in the way [Deputy Secretary of State John] Negroponte dodged two critical questions [during the interview]: First, how is the United States going to stop Taiwan from continuing to push for the referendum? Second, what is the United States' possible reaction if Taiwan's UN referendum triggers conflicts across the Taiwan Strait?

Negroponte's original intent was perhaps to retain strategic ambiguity [to these questions] so that he can enjoy more elbow room.

But the consequence is that [such ambiguity] might mislead both China and Taiwan and make people believe that the United States is at its wits' end or that it is still testing China's bottom line. Such misunderstanding will encourage Taiwan, while China may be forced to adopt a tougher stance, a move that will significantly squeeze Washington's room for ambiguity. ...

"... The real concern of the United States and China lies in the fact that, once the referendum is passed and before the new president in Taiwan is sworn in, Chen may continue to step on the red line of de jure independence, for instance by linking in one way

or another the day on which the referendum is held with Taiwan Independence Day. Should this happen, the problems and grudges between Washington and Beijing will become more serious than they are now. Regardless of whether it bodes well or ill for Taiwan, Chen's ability to turn the issue of de jure Taiwan independence from a taboo or red line for Taiwan into a hot potato or a potential fuse between the United States and China has helped to build the foundation for his political standing in the post-Bian era."

C) "Negroponte Has No Right to Scold Taiwan's Democracy"

The pro-independence, English-language "Taiwan News" [circulation: 20,000] editorialized (8/31):

"U.S. President George W. Bush took an unfortunate step Tuesday in his 'war against referendum' aimed at the initiative launched by the governing Democratic Progressive Party for a nationwide citizens' vote on whether to use the name of 'Taiwan' to apply to join the United Nations. ... We should add that Negroponte grossly distorted the so-called 'four noes' by turning them from a pledge to refrain from four specific actions into a blank check and by ignoring the fact that Beijing has trampled on Chen's precondition that the 'four noes' would be valid 'so long as the PRC government bears no intention to use military force against Taiwan' through its threatening deployment of hefty offensive forces and missiles opposite Taiwan and by the enactment in March 2005 of an 'Anti-Secession Act,' which authorizes the use of 'non-peaceful means,' if Taiwan does not 'behave' and persists in refusing unification. ...

"The choice of Negroponte as the messenger should have dispelled any illusions about Bush's commitment to democratic values. No other U.S. leading diplomat has anything approaching Negroponte's rich experience as a hit-man for Washington's 'wars' against democracy and social justice under the catch-curse of 'communism' in Asia, Latin America and the Middle East and as a specialist in covering up gross abuses of human rights by death squads organized by U.S.-supported dictatorships. ...

"It is no small irony that Negroponte's arrogant warning to the DPP government to "behave" took place almost simultaneously with the

endorsement of the proposed U.N. referendum as a legitimate exercise in 'direct participatory democracy' by 'communist' Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, whose Sandinista government had been the target of the vicious and ultimately successful 'contra' war which Negroponte helped to stage-manage from Tegucigalpa. We urge the Bush administration to cease acting as Beijing's 'enforcer' and return to support democratic values by accepting President Chen's invitation and engage in direct and equal dialogue on the question of Taiwan's U.N. membership, instead of sending paternalistic warnings through the media of an authoritarian PRC and a notorious defender of military dictatorship who has no right whatsoever to speak to us about how to "behave" as a democratic nation."

D) "What's the U.S.' Next Step If the Referendum Passes?"

Dr. William Fang opined in the conservative, pro-unification, English-language "China Post" [circulation: 30,000] (8/31):

"... Taipei will file another formal membership application with the world body, only this time on an even stronger basis -- the unequivocal support of the majority of Taiwan residents, as indicated by the results of the referendum. Of course it is a foregone conclusion, which is clear even to 'pan-green' leaders, that in the present world situation the application will fail again.

Such behavior has been jeered by knowledgeable people as 'head-bumping diplomacy' which will only bring humiliation and other bitter fruit in foreign affairs to Taipei. So what? The political climate in Taiwan has already become one in which defeats and humiliation are a plus for President Chen, in terms of winning sympathy votes at polls, as long as he dares to openly assert and re-assert the sovereignty of Taiwan against all odds. On this matter, many native Taiwanese care more about the process than the outcome. There are already indications that the stronger the U.S. opposition, the greater solidarity displayed by the 'pan-green' camp. No matter what, in the eyes of large numbers of native Taiwanese, President Chen is destined to be a hero, either triumphant or tragic.

"The real question should be directed to the United States: What is the next step it will take to effectively stop President Chen from further moving toward Taiwan independence to which Washington has voiced its firm opposition? It is generally acknowledged that the most important reason that Chen and his supporters have gone so far in pursuit of their goal of an independent Taiwan is the tolerance and conniving of the U.S. government over the years, as Americans believe the island existing outside the sphere of Beijing's influence complies with their national interest. ... Negroponte told Hong Kong-based Phoenix TV that the U.S. believed Taiwan

authorities should display a responsible attitude in enhancing Taiwan's interest, while at the same time not trying to undermine regional stability. It was well said. But, Washington should lose no time in taking effective steps to make Chen halt his irrational and risky course on Taiwan independence."

WANG